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THE TEMPER OF THE AMERICAN

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One of the most perplexing problems in the growth of every national state is the adjustment of its own organism to the changing conditions of its existence. While the conflicts with exterior foes and forces are always met by the united strength of the people of the state, the conflicts of peace are attended by the most trying antagonisms. The concentration of political power and authority is vigorously opposed, and the lesser units of government strive almost to the death to maintain their historic prestige. The civil wars of the world have for the most part found their causes in the antipathies which the lesser and local political units have nurtured toward the greater and dominant political life. And the increasing complexity of the larger problems of government finds but little sympathy in the minds of the people at large. This meeting-point of local and national administration promises to be a zone of perpetual conflict. The local political life tends to become an organism of simple structure which finds its chief expression in a more or less democratic assemblage. If we except the great municipalities, the lesser political organisms quickly attain their growth, and then are subject to but slight modifications. The circumstances which environ local life are of a persistent type, and demand only the enforcement of the customary administration. The immediate boundaries of each local political unit are political units of a like character which are striving for kindred ends. The entire life of every people is thus organized into political communities which subserve neighborhood needs, and which only occasionally touch the larger problems of administration. And as members of the same state, their mutual animosities are lessened in poignancy, while their kindred ends serve to ally them in their insistence on local privileges.

The national state, however, is far differently conditioned.

It is a complex structure which by every new experience is rendered more complex and intricate. It is subject to a continuous growth, and to rapid, sometimes radical, changes. Its environment is not constant, and varies from peaceful international intrigue to the forceful outbursts of intermittent wars. The national political organism is in the midst of a twofold conflict: the conflict which it maintains with contemporary states for international prestige, and the internecine conflict which is perpetually modifying its organism from within. The contemporary states which form the immediate environment of the national political organism are inherently antagonistic, and it is only occasionally that they form peaceful alliances for their mutual welfare. The problems of national administration are rendered even more difficult of solution by the fact that the officials of the national state are drawn from the local political units, and they are deeply imbued with local prejudices. They approach the problems of national and international politics with the training of the town-meeting or of the rural city or county. The ease with which they have achieved local prominence and the facility with which they have disposed of the requirements of local government give them an overweening confidence in their power to dispose of every contested question in national political life with like success. There is but slight appreciation of the fact that local administration has little resemblance to the administration of the national state. And the self-confidence of the official only bespeaks the attitude of the public mind. The locality has ever denied that its innate capacities and limited political experience were too circumscribed to comprehend the problems of the nation. And the popular ear is deaf to the cries of national peril.

This persistence of provincialism is worthy of the keenest study, and its relation to the national welfare makes a comprehensive knowledge of its essential character of the greatest importance to the citizen. To the American most of all is the problem important because here the national state is in its beginnings, and the impress of the locality is still the most significant phase of the national political experience. The self-confidence of

the community has transformed itself into a national trait, and is recognized immediately as one of the distinguishing marks of the American spirit. Everyone who has intelligently observed American life has been impressed with its optimism. However dangerous and threatening present conditions may be, the American is not distressed, for he believes that finally everything will be adjusted. The prevalent municipal corruption, the horde of immigrants who segregate in various parts of the United States and fail to assimilate American ideals, the increasing economic complexity with its strikes and lockouts and its recurring periods of financial stress, these may be acknowledged as threatening, and yet the optimistic thought of the people is not appalled. If we should inquire the reason for this boundless faith in the future welfare of the national life, it would be referred to the temper of the American people. The people are believed to be right at heart, and when they realize the dangers which beset them, they will rise to the emergency and overwhelm the untoward forces. When a mistake has been made, or when political or economic conditions lead to dire hardships and seemingly insoluble problems, the people are believed to have been deluded. And all that is thought to be necessary in order to insure a recurrence of national prosperity is the enlightenment of the popular mind.

This universal optimistic temper of the American is broadly recognized. It may be well to inquire into the thought and life of the American himself that we may know what are his characteristics which are sufficient for such boundless faith. It is not a little remarkable that while we have had many studies during the past few years of different types of aliens who have domiciled in America, and while several classes of society have been analyzed, the indigenous American has been overlooked. Perhaps it has been thought that it is not necessary to analyze one who is universally prevalent, and with whose most intimate experiences everyone is familiar. But amid the rapid changes in the industrial conditions of this nation, and the promise of quite as radical modifications of the political phases of our national life, the quality of the indigenous American can no

longer be overlooked. For it is this primal life which is depended upon to solve all the problems which affect our national welfare. The dangers arising from an indiscriminate immigration are admitted, but it is averred that the children of immigrants become thorough Americans. The multiplication of industrial enterprises may modify the familiar conditions of national life, but it is claimed that the American spirit will prove an efficient ballast to prevent national shipwreck. Municipal corruption may be universally pervasive, but the people are undisturbed through a consciousness of their own integrity.

Upon an examination of the American temper at first hand it is found to be predominantly rural. The indigenous American is a resident of an agricultural community. He pursues agriculture directly for a livelihood, or he engages in some occupation which ministers to the rural classes and which is affected by the conditions of rural life. The rural town, which acts as the chief market for the agricultural produce and as the county seat for the administration of local government, seldom exceeds in size five thousand inhabitants. There may be minor manufactures in these municipalities, but they have no foreign market and find their chief end in providing for the necessities of the surrounding countryside. The American is attached to the soil and believes in a rural economy. Success and labor are convertible terms. He is no believer in a privileged class. He points with pride to the self-made man, the one who began his life-career penniless, and has amassed a fortune. He reads the stories of men who have risen to high station, and in each narrative he finds that success has resulted from constant struggle with untoward circumstances. He has no faith in prerogatives of birth. In his own community he can refer to numerous instances in which a moderate inherited estate has ruined a promising youth, and he believes a heritage of toil is the most valuable legacy which can be bequeathed to a son or daughter. He is fond of the axioms of Poor Richard, and discovers their truth anew in his own experience and in the experiences of his friends. A failure to accumulate a competence is ascribed to shiftlessness. He has no sympathy with the claim that economic conditions have

changed and that the youth of high aspirations has not the same opportunities to amass a fortune that his father enjoyed. If the youth of the family has failed to obtain employment at home, and has gone elsewhere upon the same quest, but without success, the failure is explained by the adage that "the rolling stone gathers no moss." If the newly married pair begin life with a modicum of comforts and then are unable to maintain the standard with which they began their marital career, their extravagance is denominated the chief cause of their failure and is believed to be merited. The indigenous American is a thorough believer in the Canonist doctrine that there is sufficient labor in every community to support every inhabitant, and that a failure to be employed is a personal fault. A tramp is a reprehensible being, who deserves to be punished for remaining idle and for becoming a burden upon the community.

The American recognizes few distinctions of caste. Labor is the common heritage, and the well-to-do toil as manfully as do the poor. The children of the prosperous, particularly their sons, seek employment among the neighboring families. The children of a man of wealth labor with the hired wage-earners and share with them the family meals and the several sleeping-apartments. American philosophy is opposed to the recognition of caste and rank. There is a universal willingness to bow to the possessor of wealth, but every rich man is the embodiment of successful toil, and hence the rule of American life is not disturbed. The rich and learned, and perchance the one who may visit the community in whose veins flows the more gentle blood, may be gazed upon with awe and served with obsequiousness, but American canons still attach to the manual toiler the greatest significance, and refuse to acknowledge that any prerogative other than that of personal worth can be admitted in the community.

These economic conceptions temper the entire life of the American. The success of the toiler is deserved, and the failure of the slothful is likewise merited. But a third term is added. Not only are success and toil synonymous, but each is deemed the equivalent of the ethically right. The one who labors is not

only rewarded by success in accumulation, but his life is meritorious for its goodness. The one who refuses to toil, who is an idler, naturally becomes occupied with evil. The proverbial philosophy again perpetuates this belief in the adage, "Satan finds some evil still for idle hands to do." The indigenous American measures ethics by an economic standard. Since the man who toils is successful in accumulation and success is worthy, goodness is identified with success. And since the improvident persons in the local community tend to become vicious and dissolute, evil is identified with failure. The American is puzzled when evil befalls a good man: the matter is incomprehensible to him. And it is anomalous when one who is notoriously evil achieves a fortune, for this too contradicts the philosophy of American life. For he believes that evil should be its own reward, and that the wrongdoer should fail in his undertakings and should be apprehended and punished. His chosen literature convinces him that his current beliefs are true. The narrative of the struggles of successful men show that their evil opponents finally were reduced to want. The literature which is circulated through the Sunday-school library teaches also the unwavering execution of this law. And when the American occasionally attends the theater, the plays which he prefers are those in which the villian is discovered and punished, and in which virtue and right are finally triumphant.

The American is a firm believer in himself and in the solidarity of his community. The successful man was always born on a farm, and was acquainted with the hardships of rural life. And it was the straits of his early life which developed the sterling qualities of his character that afterward led to signal successes. He believes that the qualities of life which have achieved success in the neighborhood are universally potent. In his exceptional visits to the theater, he sees the honest agricultural toiler as the chief agency for the thwarting of evil and the rescuing of innocence. The skilful machinations of the confidence-man have no efficacy against the swain whose intentions are unalloyedly good. But the value of the community depends to a great degree upon the preservation of its pristine character

intact. For the American is usually of progenitors who also were born in America, and who perchance occupied the land upon which the American himself still resides. The staid members of the community are those who have been reared within its borders and who are interrelated with many of the older and more substantial families by marriage. The dependence of the community is upon its substantial citizens; hence they must be upheld and sustained. The strange face is not welcomed. The transient is bidden to leave the neighborhood with all speed, and the individual or family who come as strangers to the community and desire to establish permanent residence within its borders are not welcomed until they have proved their worth by time and by achieving a considerable fortune.

The American temper is also dominantly political. The chief citizens of the community are chosen to the local offices, and there is keen interest in the outcome of every election. Every man is a partisan. However good friends men may be in their neighborhood life, they are bitter enemies in their political preferences. The American will oppose his best friend who seeks political office but who is affiliated with a party organization different from his own, and he will give his support to an unworthy member of his own party. He accepts the platform of his party as an *ex cathedra* utterance and believes its every statement is a verified fact. But the platform of the opposing party is full of deceit and its policies will be destructive to the political life. Its candidates, if they are elected to public office, will exploit the public for their private advantage. But the American is not deeply affected by charges of corruption in public office. If the official whose integrity is questioned is of an opposing political affiliation, he ascribes the dereliction to that fact. If a member of his own party is accused of malfeasance in office, he may acknowledge the truth of the accusation, but he is not inclined to condemn the offender. For the American mind is not keenly alive to the sacredness of public office. The incumbent is expected to exploit the public if it can be done without detection, and the American admires the astuteness of the one who can thus improve his private fortune with the greatest skill.

The indigenous American is a firm believer in favoritism and privilege. His every conception is tempered by the rule of the partisan. In his purchase of domestic necessities he feels that the price of commodities should be lessened in his case, and he suggests this course to the merchant in an undertone. If he is involved in litigation, he ascribes an adverse verdict of a jury to the personal dislike of certain jurors for him, and it is inexplicable to him that one who is his sworn friend should permit any judgment to be entered injurious to his interests. In the course of a legal proceeding, he insists that his attorney shall consult the judge privately, and frequently he beseeches his intimates to seek interviews with the court in order to influence the tribunal in his favor. Upon the occasions when he is drawn for jury service, he practices these precepts faithfully. He pays little attention to the issues involved or to the weighing of the evidence which is presented in the trial of the cause, but favors his friend even at the expense of justice.

In his religious affiliations, the American is passively orthodox. He is rarely a zealot. His interest in the church is often inane, but he firmly defends it against any attack. His own life may not be in conformity with its tenets, and he is very willing to acknowledge his personal shortcomings. He insists that had he conformed to the teaching of the church he would have lived a life of higher spiritual tone. He is not specific in this self-depreciation, but asserts the fact as indisputable. He believes in religion as an essential safeguard of the community, and shuns the critic of the neighborhood ecclesiasticism. Anyone who is an avowed independent in matters of religion may be assured of popular execration. If such a religious free lance becomes a candidate for political office, the chief opposition which he will incur will be criticism and condemnation of his religious forwardness.

The American is not predisposed to pleasure. A few books may be observed in his home, of which the most noticeable are the Bible and sectarian literature. With these are frequently associated the Acts of the recent state assembly. The assured recreation is the weekly visit to the county seat or market town

where he meets with neighbors and gossips about local political conditions or the prospects for an abundant harvest. The chief evils are attendance at the theater or the dance and participation in games of cards or of chance. These indulgences are periodically denounced by the ministers of the churches, and when the youths have united with the church, they are presumed to give up such reprehensible amusements. The reading of novels is classed as trifling, and sometimes as even dangerous to the moral tone. In the weekly visits to the nearest town, there is more or less imbibing of intoxicants. The meeting of friends is made more cordial by their mutually partaking of stimulating beverages, and frequently before the day has closed, the American has succumbed to his bibulous propensities.

The American firmly believes in versatility of gifts. He has no faith in specialized powers. He admires the man who is equally fortunate in all his undertakings. His ideal is one who has achieved startling prosperity in many different lines. As boy and man, in business and professional life, the ideal of the American attains a like success. In the common thought the potential of man is convertible into any form, and anyone who has ability cannot but win a prominent place in the public regard. The college professor is one who can teach any branch of learning with equal aptitude; the lawyer or physician can also direct agricultural or commercial ventures successfully. The public speaker in particular is vested with the attributes of seer and sage. Verbosity is apotheosized. Anyone who is fertile of felicitous expression is believed to speak verities; if he becomes a writer, his publications meet with ready and popular sale; his name is used and accepted as a guarantee of worth. There is little investigation into the sources of facts, and little regard for original authority. A statement of platitudes by an acceptable public speaker is universally commended.

The range of thought of the indigenous American is generally limited by personalities. He is not capable of abstraction, or if in any case he can thus exercise his mental powers, he does not to do so. It is the concrete instance that is cited, the person who has done a particular thing whose acts and doings are discus-

sed. The political doctrines of a favorite local orator, the pulpit utterances of some cherished divine, the maladventures of some person in the neighborhood—these are the sole topics of conversation. Beliefs and practices, likes and dislikes are embodied in persons. The larger world is likewise observed. The neighboring youth who has gone forth into the region beyond the narrow hamlet is an object of thoughtful regard. His letters are of uncommon interest, and his achievements are the pride of all his friends. In the larger circles of political interests, the words of favored statesmen are read and pondered, and are quoted as conclusive in any argument. Perhaps the only departure from this rule of personality in conversation is the devotion which the American has for doctrinal religious discussion. In an earlier day the Arminian sects of the Central West were keen to denounce the “five points of Calvinism.” This attitude still persists in the older and Calvinistic communities. But in the communities which are rather predisposed to spectacular manifestations of religious zeal, the doctrine of baptism is of overweening importance. Friends and relatives are estranged because of difference of belief upon this speculative dogma. The chief object of pulpit ministrations is the establishment of this doctrine so that it cannot be questioned further. The limit which personality has placed round the whole of the American’s thought is here broken down, and every mind ranges wide in its search for destructive arguments.

The character of the American which we have attempted to analyze was formed in an earlier age. It still bears the impress of the frontier. Its simplicity, its limited range, its neighborhood character, all are vestiges of an earlier time when the neighborhood existed in practical isolation, and when the concerns of one were known to all. For two hundred and fifty years American life was nurtured of the neighborhood, and the occupations of the people were those which called only for the expenditure of superabundant physical energy. That entire period was one in which the successful man in any undertaking might have achieved quite as great success in any other occupation which he might have pursued. It was an era which pre-

ceded specialization. The absence of newspapers and railroads made communication well nigh impossible, and local concerns were magnified. The church alone impregnated the hamlet with intellectual stimulus other than that of personal gossip, and this single vent for intellectual energy was surcharged with the questionings of the people. Favoritism was a rule of life because on the frontier favors were asked and granted with sheer generosity, and the abundant hospitality offered every passer-by his food and lodging. With the growth of associative relations and the great increase of commercial facilities for intercommunication, the conditions which gave rise to the American as we have described him passed away, and the interests of the larger world succeeded the vista of the hamlet. But while the environment of the earlier American life has been outgrown, the American type has persisted. The political and social ideal is still dominantly rural. Our cities have not existed long enough to create an urban American who shall be as clearly carved as the American of the rural neighborhoods. Our rapid economic growth and the development of corporate forms of industrial organization have set awry the economic maxims of Poor Richard, but have not as yet given rise to an economic philosophy distinctively American. And the American in whom is believed to be resident a dynamic which will conserve the national life and which will thwart the untoward forces that may at any time imperil our national existence is the rural American as we have pictured him.

The chief antithesis of American life lies in this popular and general conception of the American temper, and in the actual tendency of American development. For while the temper of the people is agricultural and rural, their bent is decidedly commercial and urban. The rise of cities in this nation is too recent to have affected national traits predominantly, but their increasing growth makes the era of the city undoubted. Within a generation the goal of American youth has changed from the West to the city, and the latter has become the mart for surplus population and for the expenditure of youthful exuberance. Henry Ward Beecher's advice to the Yale students for the ministry that they could best fit themselves for their lifework by a

period of service on the frontier, and Greeley's famous epigram are alike untrue to the present, as they were true to a generation since. But the conflict of urban tendencies with rural thought, of the universal with the provincial, is one that cannot but affect the entire life of the American people. So long as the thought of the people remains provincial the larger national life cannot be lived. The provincial philosophy was true to the past but its mold is too small for present needs. And while an appeal might have been made a quarter of a century ago to the ameliorating qualities of the American temper, they are quite inadequate to safeguard the life of today. The creation of an enlarged view is one of the needs of the immediate future. Whether it is possible at all depends upon the form it may assume. The time has passed when the single type can represent the entire nation. The broad diversity of present-day interests makes it questionable whether any single type can ever be universally American as it once was.

But whether there can be an adequate substitute for the present conception of the American temper makes little difference in our consideration of its essential character. For the present conception is clearly inadequate and has caused not only the people at large, but even some acute thinkers to underestimate the problems of our national life, and to rest confidently in the power of the national spirit to retrieve every misfortune. The recent awakening of civic communities in behalf of public righteousness meets its most fatal foe in the failure of the community at large in respond to stimuli. One of the indispensable conditions to our further public growth is a realization of the limitations of American life, and among the most needed lessons for every American is a correct measurement of the temper of the people. Only thus can the persistent equanimity of every phase of our community life be overcome.